

LEADING WITH INTEGRITY: REFLECTIONS ON LEGAL, MORAL AND ETHICAL ISSUES IN SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION

Author: Clarence G. Oliver, Jr.

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INTRODUCTION

Every institution yearns for credible leadership, because such leadership goes a long way in defining the fundamental hallmarks of an institution. According to Shapiro and Gross (2013), educational leadership is situated in turbulent times, and final accountability resides with the person who is at the pinnacle of the institutional command of chain (p. 4). There is gain in saying that leadership is a double-edged sword. Bad leadership generally creates a bleeding pool for those who work in the institution (Rebone, 2014, p.25), while good leadership generally tends to bring positive energy and life to the school. Rebone (2014) pointed out that it is very difficult for a school principal or superintendent to administer and/or lead a school or school district effectively if they do not consider their ethical values (p.15).

Credible leadership will promote the vision and mission of the institution in the most honest and ethically inclined spectacle of its functionality. Such leadership glorifies the highest standards of ethical, legal, and moral operations. A leader charged with advancing the school organization must be willing to lead with integrity, despite the temptation to compromise (p. 13) It is this concept of leading with integrity that Clarence G. Oliver, Jr. offers for schools and their leaders.

In *Leading With Integrity: Reflections on Legal, Moral and Ethical Issues in School Administration*, Oliver offers compelling thoughts on school leadership in a way that every leader who desires to lead with integrity will be inspired and transformed in building his or her educational institution. The salient guide this book offers is worthy of reflection, both by seasoned school district leaders and building-level school leaders. Using a Judeo-Christian approach that seemingly comes from the author's faith, scriptural texts are used in the early part of the book to reveal the author's thoughts on what ethical and moral leadership should offer. Quoting from Psalms 26:1, Oliver wrote, "Judge me O Lord; for I have walked in mine integrity; I have trusted also in the Lord; therefore I shall not slide" (p.1).

As a matter of fact, the author would probably offer no apology to those who may not be scripturally or religiously inclined, as he believes all morality takes its roots from religion.

“Most people recognize that many of our nation’s laws and many of the values that are embraced by a majority of the population are rooted in some of the nations religious heritage” (p. 14). Beckner (2004), offered the same thoughts - that today’s ethical and moral values have been influenced and shaped by the world’s major religions (p.18). It is this perspective that the author uses to illumine civil, ethical, and moral codes with references ranging from Oklahoma school documents to various national professional bodies charged with ethical dealings in schools.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE WORK

As mentioned previously, credible institutions desire credible leadership built on the integrity of its leaders. Total dedication based on equity, fairness, justice, transparency, honesty and accountability is the call made by Oliver, to enhance a credible form of leadership in schools (p. 42). The opposite of such leadership breeds scandals, and results in a public spotlight that questions the authenticity and integrity of the leader. Such negative results can place a long-standing stigma on the institution for years (p. 35).

To avoid the adverse effects of a reckless leadership, Oliver calls for ethical and moral values in leadership, and discusses the need for leaders to be equipped with the right mental, social, cultural, and spiritual framework for decision-making. Such decisions ultimately define the integrity of the vision and mission of a school or district. Decisions should be consistent with the vision and values of the school or district, which will limit suspicion and credible rumor (p. 2).

The author asserts that personal and institutional ethics is not enough, if such integrity is not creatively and engagingly shared with the community. In other words, the language for conveying and practicing ethical and moral codes must become the culture of the school or district, so that all who are part of the school / district understand what contradicts the school or district’s values and integrity. This is what Gramsci refers to as educating citizens of the nation, so that they too can understand the contracts of their social, moral, legal, political, and democratic responsibilities, and to become active critical participants in their society (Giroux, 2011, p.65). Paulo Freire, would describe this as a “dialogical engagement” (Freire, 1992, p.81).

The author invites participants in the school to become people of support for personal and professional integrity. The call is for everyone to do, as they would like it done to them. The ultimate invitation is to do no harm to the people and institution - in relations with school community members and in the use of school and/or district resources. To lead with integrity means being the most accountable custodian of school personnel, facilities, and resources for the purpose of reaching the highest potential and encouraging others to do the same under the same conditions and privileges (pp. 20-22).

The author comprehensively appraises relationships and contracts both within and outside the school. He offers a compelling case for avoiding shady deals that put the reputation and integrity of the leader or the school at stake. Thus, ways of conducting business with the political and corporate world should be explicitly clear, transparent, and ethically oriented. He reinforces this with various ethical codes of operations from the state of Oklahoma, along with other national ethical codes of transactions, especially in relation to the school organization. Policies for dealing with outside groups for school purchases, supplies, fund raising, donations, and physical / capital projects must be guided by the highest ethical and moral considerations

and expectations. Leaders must remember at all times to separate private and institutional business as a way to avoid taking advantage of institutional resources, no matter how big or small (pp. 41-128).

The author offers a strong, credible warning on romanticizing with commercial and business institutions that have used the guise of partnership to embed school and district integrity into their code of business ethics. For instance, Coca Cola tying their market slogans with school visions and missions in a way that is not sacrosanct with the health needs of the students and teachers. The author alerts leaders to the dangers of corporatization offered in packages of great deals in the name of school improvement and advancement with 21st century tools (pp. 129-134). Oliver stated: “constant care must be taken that bricks, and mortar, dollars and cents do not become the ends of educational enterprise rather than the means to the end” (p.71). Schools must remain schools, and not simply become political and commercial toys for corporate bodies and market ideologies that are bent on commodification, and disposability of young people (Giroux, 2010, p. 54).

Oliver also provides ethical case exercises for utilizing the ethical quotient as a mirror for ensuring that legal, moral and ethical issues are measured through a sanitized standard of the highest good (pp. 135-145). The author warns about the temptation of cutting corners with policies, ethics and codes of operation in the belief that ‘a little bit will not hurt’ (pp.150-164). The author argues that it is usually the desire to cut corners in piecemeal that corruption is designed and orchestrated, and becomes the virus of destruction in schools and districts. This book offers a profound guide for an ethical and moral leadership that is needed today more than ever before. The author believes that new leaders are not well-equipped with the ethical and moral foundations that are required for a school leader to lead with integrity (pp. 146-149).

Personally, I argue that even if such is offered, there is no guarantee that people will go out and live strictly by the ethics of their jobs, as the author himself attests to in chapter 17 (p. 148). However, I strongly align with his call for an ethical leadership, since we are better with it than without it. With it, self-accountability is demanded. Without it, self-accountability is low, and rot and/or scandal results.

CONCLUSION

Although the book is very well-written and serves as a guide for leading with integrity, it dwells too much on the school operations in Oklahoma. A national and even transnational perspective would have made the book’s content more globalized. Although the author knitted his input with standard operating ethics of various national contracting firms, he is limited to the State of Oklahoma in terms of ethical school operations. A run through similar documents across a dozen states would have better positioned his reflections on legal, moral and ethical issues in school administration. Perhaps he intentionally used Oklahoma as a mirror for his reflection and left the reader to localize it to his or her context.

His initial grounding in scriptural texts, clearly stemming from his faith, may be criticized by non-religious scholars and practitioners as being religiously biased, and not based on empirical data. Objectivity of the scriptural reference in a secular document may be interpreted as being subjectively skewed to certain religious beliefs, even though I do not think it takes away from the fundamental message that the book offers.

To conclude, I find Oliver's book to be a useful ethical, legal and moral manual for educational leaders who desire to lead with integrity. The book is a sound companion, especially for building level administrators who need additional thoughts on integrity in leadership. For students and seasoned school administrators alike, the book serves as a valuable asset in considering the legal, moral, and ethical soundness of action within a post-modern environment that thirsts for leaders who have the capacity to lead with integrity.

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Reviewer's Biography

Akpoughul-Abunya Msughter Moses is a doctoral candidate for Educational Leadership at Lewis University in Romeoville (Chicago), IL. He is a member of the worldwide religious order of the De La Salle Christian Brothers, in the Catholic tradition. Originally from Naka, Gwer West Local Government, Benue State, Nigeria, he has lived and studied in the United States during the last five years. He served as Rector and principal of St. Peter's junior seminary Yola, Nigeria for six years. He was a member of the National Commission of Catholic Seminaries in Nigeria. He has served on various administrative councils for his religious order in various capacities. He was Africa's representative on the International Council of Young Lasallians in Rome, Italy for four years. He has led and participated in youth ministry for his religious order in Nigeria, Canada, Ethiopia, Kenya, Brazil, and in the United States. Until a few months ago, he was a university minister at Lewis University for three years, and last spring, he taught 'Ethical and Moral foundations for Educational Leaders' in the Masters program for education. He is currently exploring indigenous cultures through indigenous films as a tool for preserving, decolonizing and fostering language, culture and education. He is also interested in areas of cultural intersections, critical theory, social justice, and critical transformative societies.

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